"Throughout that happy season, only Nance was unhappy. She didn't want to marry Dick—what was it she did want?"

—"'Fore ever he'd kicked his foot loose o' the stirrup," Pop chuckled.

Judy's shy response was almost as prompt:

"Perhaps—some day." And then, "As soon as ever spring comes," she promised.

IT'S lovely to see spring waking up on Big Stoney, but it's lovelier still to hear it. From every thicket and glade comes the song of the bobolink, of the redbird and the wren; and across the little valleys comes the call of the quail and the soft murmur of the doves. Above the purling of the waters you can hear the alders stirring, and the first little leaves of the willows rustling in the breeze.

But the happiest notes on Big Stoney that year were the sounds of hammer and saw as Dick Hartridge and his helpers built Judy's cabin across the branch. Dick had wanted to take her over to the Divide, where his contract held for another winter; but Pop's generosity and wiser counsel had prevailed.

"Thar hain't no fittin' place fer a woman to live over thar," he said. "Take that fifty-acre tract acrost the branch fer yourn. Put ye up yer cabin an' git in yer crap. Next winter ye kin go back an' forth, an' when yer contract runs out ye've got yer home an' yer start here to come back to."

All day long, up and down the trail, was heard the clatter of the mules bringing up the window-lights and the planed lumber for the inside finishing. Queer, bulky loads they brought, too, of furniture and dishes, ordered from the town. Nothing was too good. "Pretties to the pretty," Pop said, going on from one extravagance to another.

But prettier than any of the "fotched-on" pretties was the wedding party itself. Every one came, down from the little hollows, from Little Stoney across, from the Gap beyond, by twos and threes, in merry cavalcades. It was in laurel-time. From the laden bushes the ripe petals scattered as the guests brushed against them, till every littlest forest path was a flowered trail that led to Judy's wedding.

Throughout that happy season, only Nance was unhappy. She didn't want to marry Dick Hartridge—what was it that she did want? To be loved and petted and spoiled herself? Or did she want, all at once, to be that other kind of woman that men were more likely to cherish? There were whole long, lonely days when she tried to fight it out by herself in the woods. "But even the woods hain't the same no more," she found. She was restless and sleepless, and torn by feelings she could neither stifle nor comprehend. She waited for the days to go by.

"When *she's* gone, an' Pop an' I air alone ag'in, it'll be old times come back," she thought.

But instead of that it was worse. There was a loneliness about their own hearthstone, now, that even Nance couldn't get over. All its old comfort and cheer seemed to have followed Judy across the Branch to the new cabin. Pop never could get over the daintiness of its white curtains and its white counterpanes. As for Judy—Judy enshrined in happiness in her own home was a greater marvel than ever. It was as if Pop had left home too. He was always over there.

"Why didn't ye come over when we hollered fer ye?" he would inquire of Nance, after supper and an evening by Judy's hearth. "She had ev'rything set out ready an' waitin' fer ye, an' ye never come."

"I was busy a-doin' things here," Nance would answer, turning away to hide her own sullenness.

FINALLY, one day later on in the summer, she came to him.

"I'm a-feelin' fer a change, Pop," she said. "An' they're writin' fer me to come down to Harlan Town. I hain't never been. I guess I'll go."

"Ye'll be a God-a'mighty lonesome critter in town. Ye'll like hit jest about as well as a wood-hawk would."

"I reckon so, but I'm a-goin'. You'll be all right. Ye kin eat over at Judy's. She'll look atter ye."

"I kin look atter myself that long. I'll give ye jest four-an'-twenty hours to git plumb sick of it," Pop called out in farewell.

But the days lengthened into weeks, and the weeks into months, and still Nance didn't come.

Finally, one cold, wet day late in December, draggled and spent as the day itself, Nance came back. When Pop came in from the woods, there she was, huddled in her shawl by the fire.

"Air ye feelin' sick, Nance?" he asked.

"I'm cold," she returned briefly, drawing closer to the blaze.

"Town were too much fer ye?"

"Yes, town were too much fer me," she replied.

"Then whatever did ye stay all this time fer, when I kep' a-writin' fer ye? I've been a-wantin' ye here the worst kind o' way! I'm bound to be off to the loggin' with Dick. They're a-needin' me most mightily as foreman. But thar's Judy. She never could stay alone, an' now less'n ever. When the bad snows come an' the cricks git up, hit's goin' to make travelin' so we won't git back here fer weeks on end. But that don't matter, as long as ye're here. Ye kin look atter her, an' the place too, as good as ary man. I al'ays said, ye know, I raised a better boy when I raised you than Gib Ellis on Little Fork did when he raised his whole eleven, an' not a gal among 'em."

But Nance's smile had none of its old-time joy at his praise.

"I reckon so," she returned dully.

"If town ain't got it out o' ye."

"Town ain't got it out o' me," she returned. "Ye kin take as soon a start as ever ye like in the mornin'. I'm back—to stay—I reckon."

"That's right!" Pop returned heartily.

When she woke in the morning Pop had gone.

"Shut the door to over thar, an' come an' stay with me," Judy coaxed. "You an' me each to be farin' alone this-a-way—each to be tryin' to cook little enough fer one!"

"I reckon I'll stay on here whar I belong," Nance returned, with a hostility that was final. "I'll be workin' round outside most o' the time. If there's ary thing ye want, day or night, ye kin holler; I'll hear."

But Judy never called.

IT isn't lonely up on Bear Branch in summer, when the woods are full of birds and living creatures, and when the crop and all the green growing things are like living things too. And then in summer there are people passing by; hardly a day but some one comes. But after winter once sets in in earnest, no one takes the upper trail. Those who live up there must live unto themselves.

It would be hard to tell which of the two was lonelier—Nance, shut up within herself, repelling every proffered friendliness on Judy's part, or Judy herself. The rose was gone from her cheeks now. Sometimes the stinging wind would whip a little color back to them, or the heat of the fire bring a flush; but it soon died away. But with every mark of increasing frailty Nance's hatred grew greater. It wasn't the hatred of a girl any longer, but the deeper, far more unreasoning hatred of a woman. There was something about it that seemed to stifle Judy. If she only thought of it sometimes, she felt as if she couldn't breathe.

"But no wonder—no wonder she hates me!" she couldn't help crying to herself in wondering pity.

The days were lonely, but the nights were lonelier still. Nance, who used to sleep like an Indian, would lie awake sometimes from dusk to dawn, facing her despair. But, after all, she wasn't facing it alone. Over in her cabin, Judy, sleepless too, trembling at the owl's hoot from the Judas tree by the door, shivering with a nameless dread at the lonely barking of the foxes on the hill,—"Not that I'm afeard," she would whisper to the little flicker of a blaze that she kept on the hearth for company, "but hit's so lonesome!"—Judy, lying awake, was thinking and thinking of Nance, trying to divine how she could overcome her hostility and penetrate the isolation to which she had condemned herself and her despair. As the days went by, and Nance's hatred instead of lessening grew only more intense,